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NOTES ON YOKUTS WEATHER SHAMANISM AND THE RATTLESNAKE CEREMONY

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121 THE following notes were obtained by the writer on a visit to the Tule Reservation near Porterville, Tulare County, California, on December 20, 1949. The informant from whom
115 the notes were obtained, José Vera, was an 82-year-old man who was half-Mexican and half-Koyeti Yokuts. José was capable of speaking Koyeti, Spanish, and English. The experiences related to me by this man were in part his own, in part those related to him by his Yokuts maternal grandmother. He was emphatic that he could not be a real spokesman for the almost aboriginal culture of his grandmother because that had passed away by the time he was born. Despite his modesty, however, it is evident from talking to him that he had seen enough of the remnant of the old culture to have received and retained some of its flavor. Many of the things he saw, heard, and believed in when he was a boy he found could not be explained to younger Indians of this generation. It bothered him not to be able to make himself believed and understood by these younger people. José was troubled by his inability to equate childhood experiences and teachings, to which he still retained some loyalty, with modern life and thought. It was in this troubled and thoughtful mood that he told about Yokuts weather shamanism and the rattlesnake ceremony.

796 When José was about ten years of age the Koyeti Yokuts
789 held a "fiesta" which was attended by a number of neighboring groups. The performance was held near the town of Porterville, and it was here that José saw a shaman make rain fall out of the sky that had been cloudless a few minutes earlier.
796 The rain was produced by a young Kernville Indian man who
789 became infuriated by the insults and skepticism leveled at him
578 by a drunk old Yokuts (?) man. The old man's insistence that the young man could not make rain caused the young man to become so angry that he had the old drunkard tied to a post. The young weather shaman vowed that he was going to kill the old man for his insults. Lending at least moral support to the young man at this time were his father and his father's father, both of whom were proved weather shamans
791 and had taught this art to the young man.

796 José said that the young man first got a container full of
789 water, the contents of which he violently sprinkled about him.

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He then began to "act crazy." He rolled across the ground, picked up ashes and dirt and threw them into the air, and made certain use of a cord of eagle-down. He gesticulated, talked, and prayed. Soon a wisp of cloud began to blow across the sky and shortly thereafter lightning flashed and a rumbling came from the earth. People had brought watermelons to the fiesta, and when the hail began to fall it drummed loudly against them, making a sound that José had never forgotten. All of the Indians looking on became frightened, particularly the old man tied to the post and exposed to the storm. Everything became wet. All of the people were so concerned that the head-man went up to the young weather shaman and asked him to stop the rain, saying that he would be well paid if he did so. The young man heeded the request and received a considerable sum of money. In the meantime the old man who had been the cause of the display of power by the weather shaman was cut loose from the post by some of his friends and he fled for his life.

José was not just too sure how the young man caused the rain to stop, but he thought that the rain was dissipated when the shaman spit something on a hot rock, possibly tobacco. The rising vapors were supposed to have caused the clouds to vanish and bring the rain to an end.

After telling about the successful display of power by the weather shaman, José proceeded to tell something about the activities of the young man's grandfather who used to travel among the various Yokuts groups to bring rain for them. The Yokuts, José said, used to burn off the old cover of grass and weeds, and with the rain supplied by the weather shaman they would be assured of a good crop of grasses and other beneficial plants from which they harvested seeds or obtained other products. When the grandfather came among the Yokuts people, he was supposed not to have brought along his rain shaman's outfit, but just sang, danced, and talked. For these services he rendered the old man was well paid in shell money.

José did not know who the old man was, but he did say that he lived for some time at Fort Tejón, and later with his son at Kernville where the latter lived with his wife, a Koyeti Yokuts woman. It was the son of this couple who produced hail and rain at the fiesta attended by José. It is possible that this old man was Hopodno of 1870 fame (Powers, 1877, pp. 372-373; Kroeber, 1924, pp. 511-512). José said that the old man had had contact with the coast people, the Tokya (Chumash), and that he could speak their language and may have

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791 come from there. If the old man was Hopodno, however, he was half Yauelmani Yokuts and half Shoshonean Kawaiisu (Kroeber, 1924, p. 518), hence was not a Chumash.

791 The old weather shaman, according to José, had to leave Fort
[578] Tejón because of the jealousy he created when the Indian
648 Agent made him many gifts and praised him for bringing rain
789 one summer to the parched wheat crop. The Agent had heard of the old man's power and promised him that if he could bring rain and save the wheat crop the old man would be relieved of his duties of irrigating the wheat fields. The shaman was not so easily deceived, so agreed only when the Agent promised him a substantial quantity of goods. The shaman produced a hard rain that fell all night. The rain was so heavy that the Agent became somewhat alarmed and went to the old man and asked him to stop the rain. When the old man obliged, the grateful Agent gave him blankets, money, food, and other items of value. The preferential treatment by the
[578] Agent made the various Indian head-men at Fort Tejón quite jealous, so the rain shaman left the fort and made his home at Kernville.

791 A weather shaman, José explained, was able to control the
789 weather through fasting, by eating a certain amount of tobacco, and by isolating himself (inside his house, for example,) to concentrate on making it rain. Besides doing these things
[578] the shaman had a basket in which "rocks" and eagle-feathers were kept for use in bringing rain. The "rocks" probably were
778 charmstones (Kroeber, 1924, p. 518; Latta, 1949, pp. 200-
789 209), and the feathers were probably eagle-down, or string
791 entwined with down. José never saw what the weather shaman had in his basket, because he was told that to do so would cause him to sicken and die. What José knew about the contents of the basket was what a friend of his had told him. José's grandmother, with whom he lived until her death when he was twelve years of age, also explained to him about weather shamanism and what was taking place when the young Kernville man made hail and rain fall at the Porterville fiesta attended by José.

796 José also attended a rattlesnake ceremony held at another
825 time at Porterville, although he was too young to understand fully all of the details and the implications of what he saw. He asked his grandmother about these things, and she explained them to him.

When the doctors went out to catch their rattlesnakes, Jose's grandmother told him not to go, but with a little boy's curi-

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796 825 osity he ignored her caution and joined the other small boys following one of the doctors. The doctor went to Rocky Hill near Porterville where rattlesnakes live among the rocks. When they approached the spot where the snakes were, the doctor told the boys to stay back and not frighten the snakes. In order not to miss seeing the capture of the snakes, José climbed up on a boulder. Here he saw that the doctor was equipped

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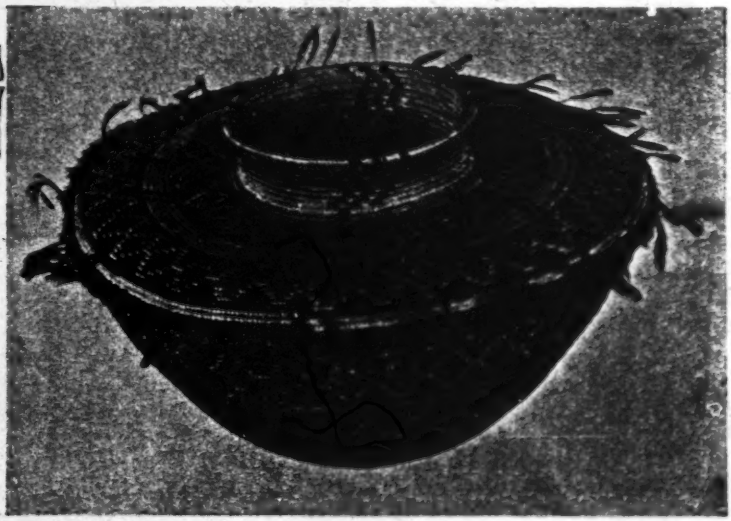

FIG. 5—Rattlesnake Basket of the Yokuts Indians.

with a small whistle, a bottle-shape (shouldered) basket, (Fig. 5) and an eagle-down string. The doctor began blowing on the whistle until some rattlesnakes began to crawl out toward him.

The little boy on the rock became transfixed with fear and curiosity as the snakes approached the shaman as if they were hypnotized. The doctor threw the string of eagle-down be- [789] hind (?) the snakes to keep them from escaping (?), and then bent down and picked them up and put them into the necked basket.

During the rattlesnake ceremony, José reported, a pit was dug into which the rattlesnakes were placed and some sort of cover (brush ?) was put over the pit. All of the people in attendance would then go past the pit and place one foot over the pit of snakes, but not quite near enough to be struck. As they did this, they threw money onto a blanket lying by the

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pit (*cf.* Kroeber, 1924, pp. 504-506; Gayton, 1948, pp. 122-124).

At the rattlesnake fiesta the various shamans from the different groups had rattlesnakes which they handled and, upon occasion, enraged sufficiently to cause the snakes to strike them. One shaman, José recalled, shook his snake until he was struck on the back of the hand. The doctor just let the snake hang down from his hand by its fangs. The stricken doctor then treated himself by rubbing ashes on his hand and by eating some tobacco. The doctor became ill, but by the following morning he was well again.

In speaking of his grandmother, José told about her contact with the California missions and of the time she spent at one of them. The reason for José's grandmother going to live at one of the missions with her little daughter (José's mother) came about when the Tokya (?) (Chumash) induced various groups of the southern San Joaquin Valley Yokuts to join them for an all-out fight against the Spanish Californians. A priest came, however, and told the people to be peaceful and not to fight, and to do the right thing. He talked them out of the fight and promised them a good life of adequate food and clothing if they would come peacefully to the mission with him. Many of the people, including Jose's grandmother and mother, went to the mission to live. Although the grandmother and her daughter were treated decently, they only remained at the mission a few years. José said that the mother and daughter left because "Indians, not like white people, love their own home country—even if times are tough at home."

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